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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to know the information that should be included on state report cards to enable comparisons among school districts and among different states. There may be many problems with such report cards, ranging from the possibility of computer error to the chance of reporting test scores that are not reliable or valid or the use of tests that do not allow for individual student characteristics and backgrounds. In report cards, as in teacher assessment, it is important to use principles of learning from educational psychology. Many items could be reported, but care is needed to keep the report card from being too big. The report card should contain the data needed to improve educational opportunities for students without relying exclusively on standardized tests with their many documented weaknesses. (SLD)

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Assessing State Report Cards on Student Achievement

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ASSESSING STATE REPORT CARDS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Assessing student achievement in the pubic schools has become very popular among governors and state legislators, but not so popular among teachers and school administrators. Each state desires to be known for its state mandated, high standards for student to achieve as well as raising test results from students. "Raising the bar" has become quite important to different states when assessing test results from students. The feeling is that all students can achieve at higher levels regardless of socioeconomic levels. Thus, the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be closed, according to these advocates. The following are additional arguments presented:

1. the slower learners need to have access to the same sophisticated knowledge which talented and gifted learners receive. Thus, high standards and expectations should be in the offing for all students. Report card results should show which group shave been counted in averages presented. Slow learners also need to be counted in averages shown on the report card.
2. special education students, including the mentally retarded, should be counted in with the others in school when determining report card data.
3. information on inclusion students must be reported. As much as possible, inclusion students need to be reported. Very few students should then remain in special education classes.
4. school systems are spurred on to high levels of performance when comparisons are made for the lay public to read.
5. school systems on probation or facing educational bankruptcy may then be motivated to improve instruction (See Ediger, 2000, Chapter Fourteen).

Data on Report Cards

Which information should be placed on state report cards when making comparisons among school districts, and among different states in the union? This is a difficult question to answer. There could be an endless number of comparisons made. Some comparisons may be like comparing apples with oranges; an illogical comparison has then been made. Thus the following may be disadvantages of issued report cards:

1. they contain data on easily reported information such as state mandated test results averages. These averages can be secured readily from machine scored answer sheets. However, computer glitches have occurred which certainly distort information when comparing one school system against the next in student achievement.
2. they may be reporting irrelevant information from carelessly developed state tests. State tests need to have high validity and

reliability data from pilot studies made. Tests which are not valid are unfair to administer due to students not having had access to those learnings contained in the test.

3. they need to look at many variables which comprise a student's total development, such as poverty, mental retardation or borderline cases, student's living in dangerous areas including drug infested and gunfire prone areas, parental stability and assistance provided for their offspring, as well as school safety.

4. they need to look at who is included in test data supplied, such as those achieving at the lower end of the continuum. If slow learners are dismissed form testing days, then the average achievement will be much higher and the school/school system will look better in terms of learner progress.

5. they need to notice if there are possibilities of tests having gotten out to teachers and students ahead of test date. If the test materials get out too soon, then coaching students to do better is a definite possibility. Teaching to the test definitely affects test results.

6. they need to be careful of students receiving more time to complete the state mandated test than allotted by the directions. If given additional time to complete the test, then results should tend to be higher.

7. they need to observe if teachers are helping students on test items during testing time or changing answers after the test from incorrect to being correct.

8. they need to be cognizant of the many pressures which teachers and principals are under to have students achieve well on state mandated tests, such as salaries being based on students doing well on state mandated tests. Teachers salaries are indeed low to begin with.

9. they need to realize that standardization of testing situations does not provide for individual differences among students. Students differ form each other in many ways including intelligences possessed. Gardner (1993) lists eight intelligences which learners have and in which they can reveal what has been learned in multiple ways, not through test taking only. These intelligences include verbal/linguistic, visual/space, logical/mathematical, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily, kinesthetic, and scientific. For example, a student may best show what has been learned in a lesson/unit of study through artistic work rather than verbal means such as in test taking.

10. they need to realize that students possess diverse learning styles. Teachers emphasizing these learning styles should make for higher student achievement. Learning styles theory (Searson and Dunn, 2001) from their research stress the following factors as being salient in teaching students:

a) formal versus informal seating of pupils. There are preferences here that pupils have in seating arrangements in the classroom.

b) conformity versus nonconformity.
c) preferences for structure versus choices in what to lean.
d) student preferences for learning alone versus studying with others.
e) a collegial versus an authoritarian teacher.
f) choices of visual, auditory, and/or kinesthetic ways of learning.
g) analytical (step by step sequential learning) versus global learners who prefer a general overview of the new knowledge/skills to be acquired and then desire to study the specifics therein.

The Theory of Learning Styles emphasizes that the teacher notice carefully under which conditions students learn best which could include listening to classical music versus more of a quiet atmosphere for studying.

Using Principles of Learning form Educational Psychology

Additional variable for teachers to stress in teaching and learning situations include the following recommendations from the psychology of education (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Thirteen) :

1. making learnings interesting to capture student attention in ongoing learning opportunities.
2. having students attach meaning to what is being taught. Meaningful learnings are understood by students.
3. accepting purpose for learning. Thus students perceive reasons for achieving, learning, and developing.
4. providing for individual differences whereby each student experiences a developmental curriculum.
5. recognize individual/group achievements so that student esteem needs are met.
6. developing within students feelings of belonging in order to meet social needs.
7. helping each students individually and within a group to achieve as much as possible. No student should be held back from learning as much as possible.
8. meeting needs for individuals to feel motivated and challenged optimally.
9. guiding students to become ethical and moral persons.
10. assisting each person to become a caring and just individual.

Teachers may be assessed on each of the above characteristics by peers or by the school principal. A five point scale may be used in the assessment process. Each teacher needs to move from where he/she is in achievement to some challenging ideal in teaching and learning situations.

Observing State Report Cards

Many states have presently or planning to develop report cards in reporting student achievement to the lay public. Oregon (Christie, 2001) has the following on their report card:

1. student achievement rating in state mandated tests of being exceptionally, strong, satisfactory, low, or unacceptable in reading, writing, math multiple choice, and math problem solving tests as well as improvement between 1997 - 2000. If a school had fewer than 40 students within the last three years, did not have students in a benchmark year (grades 3, 5, 8), and/or had other unresolved data, the improvement over time is not calculated. Listing of students on subsidized lunches, students moving in and out of a school during the school year, and levels of parental education are also listed as indicators.
2. student behavior is rated in terms of exceptional, strong, satisfactory,or low. The attendance rate and dropout rate is also recorded on the report card.
3. school characteristics are based on the per cent of students who participated in the 1999 -2000 tests. The five ratings here are exceptional, strong, satisfactory, low, and unacceptable. If fewer than 85% of students in a school were tested, a rating of unacceptable is given. Reporting among many states in the value added reflects concerns in the collection of data. On its Web site several considerations will be mentioned such as availability, comparability, reliability, and timeliness of the present information.

A report card may become quite voluminous, and yet still miss important ingredients. Averages tell something, but leave individual school/ classroom problems and difficulties out. Thus, the teacher who is struggling with many unruly students or lacks teaching materials to use in providing for individual differences is certainly in a difficult situation. If parents are hostile and rude, if it is impossible to work with the school principal, and if faculty members are unsupporting, then teaching becomes problematic indeed.

Conclusion

There are a plethora of items which could become a part of a report card for a state. Thus, report card may become quite voluminous in size. Some states report student achievement results only or largely. This approach leaves many weaknesses including the following:

1. the validity and reliability of that state mandated test. Certainly, a poorly developed state mandated test should not decide a student's future or a teacher's success.

2. lack of up to date teaching materials. For example, a tattered history text book with a 1970 copyright date leaves out much of what is relevant in the study of recent historical information.

3. adequate school buildings and facilities. Leaky roofs, broken glass panes, overcrowding in classrooms, bad odors in classrooms and in restrooms, old buildings, poorly designed buildings for teaching and learning to occur, outdated dilapidated textbooks and a lack of multimedia opportunities to learn, among other items, make for a lack of student achievement.

There are too many students who come from poor homes and this definitely hinders achievement in school. These students have not had the opportunities to learn which others have had. The late A. H. Maslow (1954) emphasized the importance of all having the following needs met to achieve as optimally as possible:

1. physiological needs including food, clothing, and shelter. In an interesting and yet sad news item entitled "No School Means No Meals For Some (December 15, 2000) quoted the following:

St. Louis (AP) -- For many area children, snow days mean fun, but for others it may mean hunger

Many parents depend upon on their school's free or reduced price breakfast and lunch programs to help feed their children. In Illinois and Missouri, about 38& of all students are eligible for these programs. In Missouri, that translates to more than 330,000 students and in Illinois the figure is 728,000 students...

"This creates a full scale emergency for some families," said Sunny Schaefer, director of Food Search of St. Louis. Higher fuel costs for heating this winter will be an additional drain on family food budgets, she added.

2. safety and security needs. With ample weapons in society, there is fear of violence with the use of fire arms and bullying in the school setting. News reports corroborate this frequently.

3. belonging needs. Students do wish to be accepted, not shunned, by others.

4. esteem needs. Students desire to be recognized, not minimized, for what is achieved in all facets of life.

5. self actualization. Here, all wish to become the kind of person desired as an ideal.

When studying and pondering over the above vital needs which should be met, there is a long road to travel in having these met. Society will have to do much , such as in meeting student physiological needs, to help students achieve as optimally as possible. Maslow's needs may also become a very vital part of a report card. How well are these needs being met? Report cards need to provide relevant data to

improve educational opportunities for students.

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